Panel won't deliver midwives bill

BOISE -- A pink-cheeked baby gnawed a red apple the size of his face as his mother listened to the Senate Health and Welfare Committee debate a bill to create voluntary licensing for Idaho midwives.

The senators killed the bill, but urged the midwives to deliver a better version next year. Midwives were disappointed by the rejection, said midwife Paula Wiens of Bonners Ferry. "We do not have the choice of becoming a licensed midwife in this state," said Wiens, who has been a midwife since 1976.

The Idaho Midwifery Council drafted the licensing proposal over the past year and a half. The "voluntary" aspect was necessary to allow more choice, Wiens told the senators. Sometimes family members act as midwives and simply don't want to be licensed.

"In every state there are exceptions that protect families who don't want, for whatever reason, a licensed midwife," Wiens said.

Michelle Bartlett, a certified professional midwife from Idaho Falls, said licensing would help doctors and residents develop trust in one of the world's oldest professions. "Many institutions are reluctant to assume liability for the transfer of care (of babies delivered by midwives)," Bartlett said.

Midwives deliver 75 percent of the world's babies, she said. During the hearing, one of the 10 or so babies and toddlers in the room would occasionally chirp or giggle. Few squalled even as the hearing dragged three hours into the evening.

To a woman, the mothers testified that midwifery allowed them to deliver their babies in supportive, caring and peaceful home environments.

Opponents, such as representatives from the Idaho Perinatal Project, were miffed the midwives only shared the proposal with interested groups a week ago.

The perinatal project seeks to reduce baby illness and death in Idaho. Perinatal project board member Pawel Zieba, a neonatologist from Boise, said the midwives were attempting to "hijack" a community. He was referring to the nearly 30 Idaho nurse practitioners who can deliver low-risk babies.

As for those who boast about the long history of midwifery, he noted hospitals and doctors are a vast improvement. In the old days, many babies died. "We are talking about enormous mortality rates, standards that are completely unacceptable," Zieba said.

Opponents objected to the lax licensing standards proposed and wanted the licensing to be mandatory. "This is not a turf issue," said Bob Seehusen, CEO of the Idaho Medical Association. "This truly is a health care concern."

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The bill wouldn't keep incompetent midwives from practicing, he said. Despite the criticism, the parents who used midwives urged senators to pass the bill.

Richard Corn, a Nampa electrician who is "under 40" and married for 13 years, went to the hospital for his wife's first baby. For the second, they went to a naturopath for delivery. On the third baby, the naturopath didn't show up and Corn had to deliver it himself, along with another one that rushed into the world in five minutes instead of 20. But for five babies, midwives did the job.

"We've chosen to have the last few, well, quite a few, with midwives," Corn said.

A midwife is less expensive and the family feels more comfortable, he said, noting his 10th baby is on the way. "I'm excited now that the midwife we've chosen can be licensed," Corn said. But he spoke too soon.

The senators told the midwives to get input from other interested parties and come back next year. As for all the babies in the room, they weren't props to make a point, Wiens said. Women care deeply about having the choice to give birth outside of hospitals. They showed up to say so and needed to bring their babies with them.

"Women who use midwives, they have babies," Wiens said. And midwives, who remain unlicensed by the state, will keep delivering them.